



The Rise and Fall of Banda Singh Bahadur: An Analysis of His Support Base and Political Mobilization

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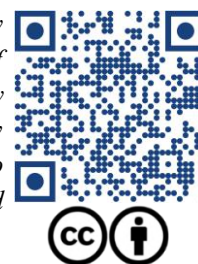
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Abstract— During his prolonged struggle against the oppressive Mughals, Hindu and Muslim nobility abandoned Banda Singh Bahadur. Banda Bahadur was one of the most notable people in the history of mediaeval India. From the very beginning, he campaigned against the Mughal empire and the intermediary zamindars. Banda Singh Bahadur and his base of support belonged to several social groupings. His army consisted of Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim fighters. Particularly sympathetic to his cause were peasants, who joined the Khalsa. The analysis of news reports of that time confirms that zamindars outside of Punjab did not collaborate with Banda, despite their own conflicts with the Mughal authorities in their own provinces. Banda Bahadur primarily led the uprising of the Bari doob Jat zamindars. In the sixth decade of the seventeenth century, the Jats displaced the Khatri as leaders of the Sikh religion. As a consequence of economic distress and harsh policies by local officials, the Jats allied with Banda to overthrow the Mughal authority. Jahandar Shah and Farrukh Siyar appointed a number of Khatri, including Suba Chand, Rattan Chand, Mohakam Singh, Bakht Mal, and others, to significant positions in the imperial services. Several other groups also help Banda in his cause like Banjaras (a class of grain merchants), even though they were besieged in a fort, the Banjaras sought to keep Banda Bahadur's troops supplied with food. Several Hindu Faquirs, Yogis, Sanyasis, and Bairagis supported Banda's cause vigorously.



Keywords— Jat, Zamindar, Sikh, Khatri, Banjara, Yogi, Bairagi, Muslim, Hindu, Mughal.

The narrative of Banda Singh Bahadur's ascent to power coincided with India's political turmoil after Aurangzeb's demise. During the reigns of Bahadur Shah, Jahandar Shah, and Farrukh Siyar, Banda fought against the imperialist Mughals. During his protracted fight, he was abandoned not just by upper-caste Hindus and the Muslim nobles of the area, but also by Sikhs headed by Bawa Binod Singh and Ajit Singh, Guru Gobind Singh's adopted son.

In 1679, Banda Singh Bahadur was born into an ordinary Rajauri peasant family. He spent his youth amidst poverty and misery. He worked diligently on his ancestry. As a consequence of the slaughter of a pregnant doe, he not only gave up hunting forever but also became an ascetic at a young age. He travelled from Kashmir to Maharashtra and settled in Nanded. Bairagi became well-known among the

populace for his tantric and siddhis arts. He was of average height and weight, with brownish hair. He had a sturdy build and bright eyes. He was clever, courageous, and physically active from a young age. Even his harshest rivals, such as Imaduddaulla Muhammad Amir Khan, complimented him for the sharpness of his features and the nobleness of his behaviour. He excelled in matchlock, sword, archery, and horseback riding. According to McGregor, "Banda Bahadur is acknowledged by everybody to have been a man of undeniable valour and courage."

At the age of fifteen, he renounced the world and lived as a bairagi for around fourteen years. At the age of 38, he met Guru Gobind Singh. Guru Gobind Singh baptised him and designated him commander of Khalsa. The Sikhs, under the capable leadership of Banda Singh Bahadur, fought

prolonged warfare against the tyrant from 1708 to 1715. As a result, he founded the first state of the Khalsa commonwealth by uniting the warring Punjabi people, providing land to farmers, and ensuring the safety of the people. He made Lohgarh his capital and issued an official seal. Guru Gobind Singh was depicted on one side, and Guru Nanak on the other, of the Akal Shahe coins. He controlled a large army and appointed administrators to manage the government. Beginning with his triumph at Sirhind, he introduced his own year (Sammāt). He constantly proclaimed himself to be a Banda or Guru's slave. In the words of Ganda Singh, he introduced Fateh Darshan: "It is true that a new greeting, Fateh Darshan, can be seen on a few of his letters, but Khalsa continued to use the old, Wahe Guru ji ka Khalsa, Wahe Guru ji ki Fateh. Banda Bahadur was massively effective in all of his endeavours. As bairagi, he was adept in mesmerism, understood the medicinal uses of numerous plants, was dreaded by the people as a magician (jadoogar), and was a skilled fighter. Upon adopting Sikhism, he became a devoted, baptised disciple of the tenth Guru and followed the gurus' teachings in theory and practice.

Banda Singh Bahadur's personality reveals that he was one of the most memorable figures in mediaeval Indian history. Taking advantage of the preoccupied situation of the empire's centre, Banda Bahadur affected the formation immensely formidable in Punjab. In order to combat the Mughals, he formed troops out of nothing and unified the scattered Sikhs under his command. He acquired significant support from the underprivileged masses. His warriors were members of the Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim faiths. But Banda Bahadur instilled in them a sense of equality, fraternity, and patriotism. Commenting on this facet of Banda's impact, Ghulam Mohyyuddin (a contemporary of Banda Bahadur) says, "poor caste Hindus, filled the ranks of Banda, and each member of his army addressed the other as the adopted son of the persecuted Guru and referred to themselves as Shahibzada."

Banda Bahadur had arrived in Punjab to advance the cause of the oppressed, the weak, and the underprivileged. Banda Bahadur began his war against the Mughal empire and the intermediate zamindars from the very outset. Peasants, in particular, were sympathetic to his cause, and a sizable proportion of them joined the Khalsa. In this context, Fauja Singh states, "Banda Bahadur's general promise at the outset of his campaign to distribute the conquered land among those who would fight for him, and his land reforms after the conquest of Sirhind, conferring proprietorship on petty cultivators, popularised his cause and made him the rallying point of the poor agricultural classes, thus broadening the base of his struggle. As a consequence, he

was able to mobilise a vast number of individuals to carry out his ambitious goals.

Banda Bahadur's calm planning, bold tactics, and offensive strategy against the soft and complacent leadership of the Mughal army were fundamental to his military achievement. In addition to the aggressive guerilla strategy of combat, Banda's war tactics contained elements like a storm, and their sheer speed was the most significant aspect of surprise. Banda Bahadur manoeuvred his onslaught using a well-planned, speed- and mobility-based strategy. Despite being a competent thinker and clever tactician, Banda Bahadur's rebellion against imperial authority was futile. His failure was not attributable to any flaws in his generalship, but rather to other factors such as lack of resources, numerical disadvantage, organisational flaws of the Sikhs, the superiority of the Mughals in terms of manpower and war material, poor army organisation under Banda Bahadur, and the gradual alienation of the upper class from his cause.

Banda Bahadur was recognised as a leader by Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims due to his policy of generosity in all his interactions. The news of the Royal Mughal Court (Akhabar-i-Darbar-i-Mulla) provides a number of records that serve in determining the attitude of various social divisions regarding the cause advocated by him. The analysis of news stories reveals that zamindars outside of Punjab did not cooperate with Banda, despite their own issues with the Mughal authorities in their own regions. The zamindars of Saharanpur aided the imperial armies' attempts to expel the Sikhs from Yamuna-Ganga doab. The Rajputs, Gujjar, and, with potential exceptions, the Afghan zamindars of Sikh strongholds backed the Mughal operations against Banda on a constant basis. Afghans not only fought against Banda but also acted as Mughal propagandists attempting to engage Muslim Zamindars and people in the holy war against non-Muslims. According to Khushwant Singh, "During the Banda's war against the Mughals, there was wanton destruction of life and property of Mughal officials and landowners, which alienated the sympathies of many Muslims, who came to see the Khalsa as the enemies of Islam. Prior to that time, only the wealthier strata of Muslims were captivated with ideas of Islamic renewal propagated by persons such as Shaikh Ahmed Sirhind. Banda's brutality hardened the Muslim peasants' hearts and made them just as anti-Sikh as their government.

Muzaffar Alam, commenting on Banda Bahadur's support from the people of the then-Punjab province, states, "The Jat zamindars of the Rohtak-Sonapat area gave him their entire support when he arrived near Kharkhauda. In addition, a considerable number of zamindars of the Parganas located on either side of the Beas, Ravi, and Shah

Nahar (Roys Canal) sympathised with and collaborated with the Sikhs. Throughout the whole of Banda Bahadur's conflict with the Mughals, the zamindars of Bari doab provided him with weaponry and horses. Chakla Sirhind was the second biggest and most significant area in which Banda had a significant following, and this allowed him to use it as a base for his efforts beyond the Yamuna and Beas.

It is evident from Khafi Khan's statements that, with few exceptions, Banda mostly led the rebellion of the Jat zamindars. It is not without importance that the Jats were the major zamindar castes in several of the Parganas where Banda had support, and that they were nearly always referred to as Malikis, or petty landlords, and malgujars, or Mughal village assessors (mauza and dehat). As for why Jats supported Banda and to what religion they belong, Muzaffar said, "Our sources do not assist us in determining the religion of these zamindars. They may not have been Guru Gobind Singh's disciples. In the sixth decade of the seventeenth century, the Jats began displacing the Khatri from the leadership of the Sikh faith. Eventually, with the expansion of agricultural operations and the foundation of Khalsa, they redoubled their efforts. The author of Dabistan-i-Mazahib remarked that while the gurus had been Khatri, they had rendered the Khatri subject to the Jats, the lowest of the Vaishya. Thus, the majority of Guru's large mass are Jats. The Sikh revolt headed by Banda provided Jats with the opportunity to not only take over the leadership of the region but also to utilise their weaponry to replace the oppressive Mughal local authority. Jats joined forces with Banda Bahadur to overthrow the Mughal government in northwest India as a result of economic strain and repressive practices by local authorities.

Jats benefited during the Sikh revolt in that they were liberated from oppressive middlemen and gained control over their land holdings. When the Banda-led peasant movement started to inflict significant losses to the commercial and merchant classes and moneylenders, they began to offer their support to the Mughals. The urban Khatri dwelling in major trade centres like as Lahore, Sialkot, Bajwara, Haibatpur, Patti, Batala, Ropar, and Samana, among others, sponsored the efforts of pro-imperial forces to battle against Banda Bahadur and his allies. Some Khatri, including Suba Chand, Rattan Chand, Mohakam Singh, Bakht Mal, and others, were assigned to key posts in the imperial services by Jahandar Shah and Farrukh Siyar in recognition of their contributions.

In addition to the rulers' open and unwavering support for Banda's cause, the Banjaras (a class of grain merchants) attempted to keep Banda Bahadur's army supplied with food even while they were besieged in a fort. Also in the highlands, they provided him with the necessary food and worked as his scouts. Some Hindu Faquirs, Yogis, Sanyasis,

and Bairagis actively supported Banda's cause by acting as spies in the imperial camp and then informing Banda Bahadur of impending imperialist movements. Unknown individuals also offered assistance to Banda Bahadur's cause. Reportedly, some individuals bought horses and munitions for delivery to the Sikh insurgents, which they transported via Kohistan. The emperor ordered quick action to be made to monitor the activities of these spies and the supply of food grains and ammunition to the rebels and to punish them if they were caught.

In the struggle against the Mughals, Banda received great broad support. Banda Bahadur was undeniably a source of energy and zeal. In his youth, he gained widespread renown as a Yogi and occultist, having been a skilled hunter in his youth. In his adulthood and campaign against the tyrant, he attracted the attention and support of several social groups. Banda Singh Bahadur emancipated farmers and granted them land ownership. In exchange for abolishing zamindari in northwest India, he received substantial support from the lower class. It is truly said that the effort was unsuccessful, but the ideal survived.

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